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SUBJECT: NRW Election Campaign: SPD's Kraft Taking Aim,
Minister-President R???ttgers Taking Cover

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Hannelore Kraft, the head of the opposition Social Democrats (SPD) in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), laid out her party's program for the May 9 state election to a February 22 consular corps gathering. Buoyed by recent WDR polling that shows Minister-President J????rgen R????ttgers' Christian Democrat/Free Democrat (CDU/FDP) coalition no longer enjoys a majority, Kraft pointed out that her underdog SPD, together with the surging Greens, are now just one point back. She sees the election, now ten weeks off, as wide open. Her main points, paraphrased, boil down to: It's the social state restructured, stupid. End summary.

¶2. (U) Kraft explained that the NRW SPD spent their five years in the wilderness since their loss to R????ttgers' CDU in 2005 taking stock, re-structuring their platform, talking to people and preparing the ground for the May election. At the rate of roughly one theme per year, they have carefully elaborated programs for:

???? Work and training: create conditions so that those who work earn more than someone on social security (Hartz IV);

???? Education (per Kraft, the #1 theme in the state): further strengthen what R????ttgers' government has begun in terms of support from early education on, create more possibilities for children to move up in school and society, and stem the annual loss of 20% of youth who either fail to finish school or lack job training;

???? Cities' and towns' financing: many are in dire straits financially; create a sort of "bad bank" for communities so they can get back on their fiscal feet and provide the services that drive much of the SPD's agenda;

???? The economy, innovation and technology: Germany and NRW in particular can only sell themselves as "better, rather than cheaper" (besser statt billiger), through innovation and creativity; and

???? Social cohesion in society must be maintained: a key factor that Kraft believes is fraying (during a recent visit to Opel in Bochum, the workers - who have been living with uncertainty for months on end - told her that if the facility closed, they would take to the streets with clubs in their hands).

¶3. (U) The campaign is well underway. The dismissal February 22 of NRW CDU Secretary General W????st for offering sponsors "rented" time with Minister-President R????ttgers was fresh meat (septel) (Kraft joked quietly that when she made her rounds in NRW and talked to people, she didn't charge). Kraft, though, stated at the outset, "It is extremely important to me that we don't run a negative campaign." People believe something is fundamentally wrong in NRW - in her view, they want to hear about a vision for future, not interparty squabbling or mud-slinging.

¶4. (U) Kraft described her efforts in recent months to put herself into the average person's shoes. Instead of the usual "meet the managers and the union folks" - shaking hands, drinking coffee,

exchanging pleasantries, then leaving a business or factory for the next appointment, she undertook an "enterprise" tour ("Tatkraft tour" - a play on words on her last name), spending a day in each of 10 work places, from a hospital to a mid-sized business, a youth center, an old people's home, and the police, among others, working with the workers, participating in their lives. The results will be presented at the NRW SPD's pre-election convention February 26-27. If she becomes M-P, she stated, she intends to continue the practice once a month.

15. (SBU) CG asked SPD Landtag member Wolfram Kuschke, who accompanied Kraft, about the situation with the NRW "Left" Party. Kraft had earlier said the SPD had hoped to draw away disaffected members who were shut out of the party's more extreme leadership. While this hasn't materialized, Kuschke said, Oskar Lafontaine's decision to leave the party leadership has caused the Left to go quiet. No one knows the candidates - they are mostly unknowns, with little profile, and out of the headlines.

16. (SBU) Comment: Kraft's SPD stands to profit from a series of small scandals and missteps, culminating with NRW CDU Secretary General W????st's February 22 resignation. The local SPD hasn't yet had to sling much mud (there is plenty coming from Berlin), as the CDU is doing a fine job of creating its own gaffes. The M-P "not knowing anything about meetings for rent" is fast turning into a topic of derision in the media and casual conversations alike - a tone new to this political season, which R????ttgers and his team will not relish, even as they scramble to find a new "general" to run

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their campaign. Kraft, who has done her grassroots homework and will take center stage this weekend at the SPD convention, for now seems on message and on target. And she is right on at least one count: this election, which could have been R????ttgers' for the asking, is up for grabs.

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